ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 19-20

AVIATION WEEK & SPACE TECHNOLOGY
25 February 1980

Strategic Cuts Laid to Faulty Intelligence

Washington—Defense Dept. factions pressing for a new manned bomber are demanding more accurate U. S. intelligence estimates of the Soviet Union's strategic weapons capability.

The bomber proponents claim that the U. S. must move immediately toward either a stretched version of the General Dynamics FB-111 with increased range and payload, or to the Rockwell International B-1 to counter Soviet strategic superiority.

According to several high-level Pentagon officials, President Carter's decision to halt B-1 production and to delay engineering development of the MX advanced ICBM was the result of faulty National Intelligence Estimates. The Carter B-1 decision came after he received Central Intelligence Agency estimates of Soviet strategic weapons strength issued in December, 1976. This was the most recent National Intelligence Estimate at the time Carter took office in early 1977.

The President's decision to delay the cruise missile program also was based on inaccurate intelligence estimates, the officials claim. In the 1976 National Intelligence Estimate Carter used in deciding on B-1 bomber production, the CIA estimated the Soviets' capability then and where they would be vis a vis the U. S. in 1982 and 1985, the officials said. "And they were off by an order of magnitude in estimates of real Russian nuclear weapons capability," one Pentagon official said.

He added that in the spring and summer of 1978 a new National Intelligence Estimate was prepared that for the first time began to pick up Soviet strategic nuclear weapons momentum, ICBM accuracy, basing and numbers of reentry vehicles being deployed. The year before that the Strategic Air Command had already determined from available information that the USSR had reached parity with the U. S. and that the momentum was continuing with the aim of achieving nuclear weapons superiority.

In the last two National Intelligence Estimates, in 1978, and again in 1979, there were massive jumps in the analysis of Soviet nuclear force capability, one official contends.

Another Defense Dept. official added that there already is a severe problem with the ICBM leg of the triad surviving an attack by Soviet ICBMs now on line, and that there is no way for the U. S. to begin to reverse this situation until the MX system starts to become operational in 1986. But it will be 1989 before MX is fully operational. USAF asked for an initial operational capability of 1983 but could not get the Administration to move the missile into engineering development because of the intelligence estimates, the officials emphasize.

Because of the vulnerability of the ICBM force, the U. S. must look at the bomber leg of the triad to take up the slack in warhead delivery. "We only need a bomber system through the 1980s, but it must be more efficient than the Boeing B-52 in terms of being able to penetrate Soviet air defense," one service official said. He added that the Soviets are testing new-technology weapon systems now at Sary Shagan that make not only bombers but cruise missiles as well vulnerable if the tests are successful. He added that the U. S. already is in the early phase of looking for a countermeasures system.

Officials in the Pentagon believe the U. S. is now in a position where there are few choices available to the President. The Minuteman force could be virtually eliminated by a first strike Soviet attack, they said, so that in reality the U. S. will be able to rely only on its bomber and submarine-launched ballistic missile forces in the 1980s.

Part of the problem, one official said, is that the U. S. will only receive information of "a gross attack warning within the first few minutes from an early warning satellite. If it is not degraded by jamming." He said it would be 15-18 min. before U. S. targets could be determined.

"ICBMs and SLBMs could be launched in response, but we would still be gathering information on the location of the attack, and we must be capable of saving a portion of the force in reserve for second strike or war fighting capability. This gives an added impetus to acquiring a new manned bomber—pronto," he said.

The official explained that if the U. S. early warning system and ground-based, over-the-horizon radars could determine that only the Minuteman force was under attack, the U. S. could have the options of trying to ride out such an attack or could launch on warning. "But we need a new defense support system early warning spacecraft to aid us in making targeting assessments, and funding has been delayed on it," he said.

Part of the problem is that Defense Secretary Harold Brown is expressing doubts about the capability of the B-1 to penetrate Soviet air defense and survive.

Penetration Feasible

"That logic doesn't hold up," another Defense Dept. official said, "If the pilots flying tactical aircraft in NATO countries must penetrate Soviet air defenses their survival chances are at least as good and probably not as good as a bomber hardened to the nuclear environment with countermeasures equipments. So you see, the implications in this logic go far beyond a new manned bomber. We are convinced that we are smart enough through a combination of tactics and electronic countermeasures to keep pace with the air defense threat."

He added that the Tactical Air Command, Strategic Air Command and U. S. Air Forces Europe are all confident that aircraft still can penetrate the USSR and survive.

The U. S. has invested 10 years in development time and about $5 billion in the B-1 bomber program. "There is no doubt that the B-1 is the best penetrating aircraft the U. S. has ever developed, and if we can manage to live with the cost we should acquire it," the official added. "But we could get the stretched FB-111 a year or so faster and at $7 billion less than the B-1. In today's climate of a significant USSR nuclear weapons advantage it will be hard to get anyone to say that that year's difference may not be important."

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"The U. S. intelligence apparatus has never been very good about estimating the USSR threat, and there is no reason to believe that we will do better in the immediate future," another senior Pentagon officer pointed out. "If you doubt it, just look back over the past five years at the Defense secretary's posture statements, revisions upward in Soviet capability and back-pedaling by the administration in power."

The MX is required "as a big missile because of its throw weight and its growth potential," and movement to reconfigure or reposture the MX force is necessary, according to USAF officers. They believe that any U. S. administration will press for arms control and that if it is not SALT 2 it will be a SALT X or some other form of agreement. The MX provides for expansion or reduction while retaining survivability, they said, and basing will not be fully decided for the MX system until 1983, so there is still time to decide.

"The Strategic Air Command has not taken a position on it," according to one Pentagon official.

One reason why USAF and Defense Dept. are delaying on making a bomber decision in the Fiscal 1981 budget request to Congress is a funding expansion the service will experience in the early to mid-1980s as a number of strategic systems peak in development and acquisition. This hump in procurement will cost the U. S. at least $20 billion per year in strategic weapons alone—$10 billion per year for MX, $5 billion per year for Trident and several billion yearly for the air-launched cruise missile and B-52 modifications. The squeeze will come in 1985, officials said.

"We are convinced that we will need a larger strategic investment in the 1980s, but when we look at total program costs we find manned bombers very attractive because they can be used for multiple missions—strategic, tactical conventional bombing and for sea surveillance/control," one top-level Pentagon official said. "Tactical aircraft are constrained by range and basing rights, and we have only to turn to the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan to emphasize that point. Strategic bombers and tankers can provide legs not available to tactical fighters."

He added that, because of range to targets in the Persian Gulf and a very long supply line, the Navy fleet is marginal in that part of the world and a new bomber would go a long way toward solving the problem.

Because of Soviet advanced air defenses, the U. S. is now exploring alternatives for increasing the survivability of air-launched cruise missiles through reduced radar cross sections, lower altitude flight profiles, higher speeds and avionics innovations.

Operating a manned bomber in that environment is complex, but compelling, according to USAF officers. Inclusion of a large force of new manned bombers would mean the Soviets could not tailor their defenses to cope only with the cruise missile.

An aircraft capable of penetrating USSR air defense also is capable of high performance in a variety of roles.

USAF is working to use radar absorbing materials to improve aircraft survivability against about 12,000 surface-to-air missiles in the USSR and against look-down, shoot-down interceptor aircraft now emerging in the Soviet forces. Methods to reduce infrared signatures are being developed. The service also is looking toward variable camber airfoils and digital flight control systems for performance improvement.

One recent development is a tail warning Doppler radar that can detect very-high-velocity, low-radar-cross-section missiles fired at bombers and automatically actuate countermeasures.

There also is in development a whole new generation of infrared flares that can be tailored to match specific engine infrared signatures.

Congressional Support

Defense officials are pressing the Carter Administration for a new bomber, and there is strong congressional support for it in the coming fiscal year, particularly in the House. "The fact that Carter made his decision based on bad intelligence information should make it easier for him to reverse himself," one House member said.

One expert last week told the Congress that National Intelligence Estimates "should do what busy officials often do not like; it will complicate their jobs. That is, the estimate's primary purpose should not be to tell them what they know or who disagrees—these elements should be in the document, but as a basis, not the end product. A good estimate should dig deeper, probe the factual bases of disagreement, highlight the critical uncertainties, raise questions that need more attention and explore the factors to which the answers to those questions are sensitive." The estimates should be a useful contribution to decision making rather than a compendium of numbers, he said. "Rather than discovering truth, estimates might better be judged by how they provoke careful debate."